

High Country Travel and Recreation Management Project

DRAFT Proposed Action

1.0 Background

The western portion of the South Platte Ranger District is within two hour's drive of several million people who live along Colorado's Front Range. As some of the closest high elevation, public land to the Denver metropolitan area, public use of the area is quite high, especially during the warmer months. The area is extensively used for camping in developed and undeveloped sites, hiking, off-highway vehicle (OHV) use, driving for pleasure, hunting, fishing, and exploration of historic mining areas. Most of these activities take place in a sustainable manner; however, in some areas unacceptable resource damage has occurred. For example, some camping in undeveloped sites has led to trampling and vehicle use in meadows and wetlands. At high elevation, vegetation recovers slowly from these effects so bare soil is often left exposed to erosion. Over time, campsites expand, leading to large bare areas, mud pits, and other resource damage.

A portion of the area is accessed off the Guanella Pass Road, which is currently being improved through the Guanella Pass Road Colorado Forest Highway Project. This project will improve the surface, grade, drainage and other aspects of the road. In addition, illegal access routes and associated non-developed (dispersed) campsites will be obliterated. Completion is anticipated in 2014. With improved access and reduced camping options, use on adjacent National Forest System lands is expected to increase.

This area has not been subject to the same level of travel and recreation planning as much of the rest of the District. For example, a Travel Management Plan was completed for the Rampart Range area in 2006 and is currently being implemented. Current regulations on resource damage and travel management would allow the District to increase enforcement; however, as funds are limited, this is not a realistic approach. Funds are also limited for visitor education or improvement of existing facilities. Consensus was developed among District staff that the need exists to develop a comprehensive plan for travel and recreation management in this area. Once the plan is completed, we will be able to use physical barriers, signs, and other means to better define acceptable use before trying to increase enforcement.

2.0 Analysis Area Description

The High Country analysis area includes those National Forest System lands that are part of the South Platte Ranger District and that lie generally north and west of Bailey, Colorado, including the area around Harris Park, Shawnee, the south side of Guanella Pass, Geneva Creek, Hall Valley, Beaver Creek and the north side of Kenosha Pass. Portions of the Lost Creek and Mount Evans Wildernesses that fall within this area have been excluded from the project. Table 1 provides a breakdown of the lands in the analysis area. Figure 1 shows the general location of the analysis area in relation to the Denver metropolitan area and the South Platte Ranger District. Figure 2 provides additional detail on the analysis area.

Table 1 Analysis Area

Analysis Area Total	98,607 acres			Percent of Analysis Area	
	Non NFS Lands	9,576 acres	10		
	NFS Lands	89,031 acres	90		
		Roadless	52,927 acres	54	
		Roaded	36,104 acres	37	

3.0 Purpose and Need

The High Country Travel and Recreation Management Project has two primary purposes: 1) to modify the travel management system to accommodate a range of current and anticipated uses while providing balance with the protection of natural resources; and 2) to better define and implement a variety of recreation opportunities to accommodate a range of current and anticipated uses while providing balance with the protection of natural resources.

The need for the proposed project is driven by the high level of public use in parts of the high country, along with decreased resources to address the effects of this use. Specifically, high use in areas such as Geneva Creek, Buno Gulch, Hall Valley, Beaver Creek, and Kenosha Pass is causing unacceptable resource damage. Extensive camping and vehicle use off authorized routes is leading to damage to vegetation, including fragile subalpine and alpine tundra, wetlands, and fens. Demand for recreation is expected to continue to increase over time because of proximity to the Denver metropolitan area and improved access along the Guanella Pass corridor. At the same time, funding for visitor education, transportation system and recreation site maintenance, and law enforcement is decreasing.

4.0 Proposed Action

The South Platte Ranger District of the PSICC is proposing to make a set of changes to travel and recreation management in the High Country portion of the District. Travel management changes would be based on the draft High Country Travel Analysis, which recommended several changes to the road and trail system. This project would be primarily focused on recreation management, roads, and trails. Implementation would take place over several years, depending on funding and work load.

4.1 Transportation System

A series of changes to the road and trail system is proposed based on the recommendations of the draft High Country Travel Analysis. That analysis also recommended several actions be taken with existing non-system roads and trails. In addition, changes have been proposed to road or trail types or legal access on road or trail access to correct past errors where actual type or access does not match the legal, documented type or access. Much of the existing transportation system would not be changed, again based on the recommendations of the draft High Country Travel Analysis. Proposed changes include both summer use and winter use, including over-snow vehicle use.

Table 2 summarizes the current transportation system in terms of route type, access type, and vehicle type. Table 3 summarizes the extent of the proposed changes in the transportation system. Table 4 summarizes the proposed changes to maintenance levels for the transportation system.

4.1.1 System Roads

The road type, maintenance level, and access type would be changed for some National Forest System roads (NFSRs):

- NFSRs would be converted to motorized or non-motorized trails, stored, or decommissioned.
- NFSRs currently open to all vehicles would be restricted to licensed vehicles only.
- Access to NFSRs would be changed for yearlong to seasonal use
- Access to NFSRs would be restricted to administrative or permitted use only.

These general actions would be accomplished by a number of specific actions:

- Physical barriers (gates, rocks, wood or timber fencing, metal post and cable, ripping, slashing, seeding, and other methods) would be used to control access.
- Signs would be installed to provide information on allowable route uses, rules and regulations, and interpretive features.
- Maintenance levels would be changed to provide different experiences on different routes.
- Some existing NFSRs would be converted to motorized trails that allow full-sized vehicles. Such trails could be used by unlicensed OHVs, but would require all users (even of licensed, full-size vehicles) to have valid OHV permits.
- Some parking and trailhead facilities would be improved, while other would be removed.
- The Motor Vehicle Use Map (MVUM) would be edited to reflect these changes and inform the public.

4.1.2 System Trails

No changes in access are proposed for existing National Forest System Trails (NFSTs). All would remain open to non-motorized uses only. Relatively few changes are proposed except:

- The Shelf Lake trail would be re-routed to a new common trailhead with South Park Trail adjacent to NFSR 119.
- The Ben Tyler trailhead would be re-located to the AG Ranch, with construction of a new connecting trail and decommissioning of the old trail and trailhead.
- Existing trails would be reconstructed to improve crossings of wet areas, reduce erosion, and for other reasons.
- No new system trails (either motorized or non-motorized), with the exception of those noted above, would be constructed.

4.1.3 Non-system Roads

Several changes are proposed for non-system roads:

- Some existing non-system roads would be added to the National Forest System as roads or trails.
- Access on non-system roads that are added to the National Forest System as roads or trails would be defined as yearlong or seasonal, open to licensed vehicles, mixed traffic, or administrative or permitted use only, depending on route.
- A number of short, non-system road spurs that lead to dispersed camping sites would be added to the system.

These general actions would be accomplished by a number of specific actions:

- Physical barriers (gates, rocks, wood or timber fencing, metal post and cable, ripping, slashing, seeding, and other methods) would be used to control access.
- Signs would be installed to provide information on allowable route uses, rules and regulations, and interpretive features.
- Maintenance levels would be set to provide different experiences on different routes.
- The MVUM would be edited to reflect these changes and inform the public.

Some of the proposed changes would correct past errors. The largest change would add almost four miles of existing, non-system roads on the AG Ranch (owned and managed by the USFS) to the system, but make these roads open to administrative or permitted use only. These roads would remain open to the public for non-motorized use. In this case, no physical changes would take place, but the system would be adjusted to match the current road use pattern in this area.

4.1.4 Non-System Trails

Several changes are proposed for existing, non-system trails

- Non-system trails would be added to the National Forest System as trails.
- Some non-system trails would be consolidated before being added to the system.
- Access on non-system trails that are added to the National Forest System would be defined as motorized or non-motorized.
- Existing non-system trails that are causing adverse effects to resources would be closed and rehabilitated to prevent future use.

These general actions would be accomplished by a number of specific actions:

- Physical barriers (gates, rocks, wood or timber fencing, metal post and cable, ripping, slashing, seeding, and other methods) would be used to control access.
- Signs would be installed to provide information on allowable route uses, rules and regulations, and interpretive features.
- Some existing, non-system trails would be converted to motorized system trails that allow full-sized vehicles.
- The MVUM would be edited to reflect these changes and inform the public.

As shown in Table 3, a substantial increase is proposed for both motorized and non-motorized system trails, with a corresponding decrease in non-system trails. These changes can be attributed to two primary causes:

- 1) Old mining roads and trails that are not on the road and trail system are currently used (albeit illegally) as four-wheel-drive roads or OHV trails. Where these roads and trails are not causing adverse effects to resources, such as soil erosion or crossing of wetlands or tundra, they would be added to the trail system to provide legal, motorized primitive driving or riding opportunities.
- 2) Existing non-system, non-motorized trails would be added to the trail system and non-motorized trails. Many of these trails are used by the public or permittees, but are poorly mapped or signed. Some trails may also be in need of deferred maintenance.

4.1.5 Decommissioned Roads

All currently decommissioned roads would remain decommissioned, except for a short (0.09 miles) portion of NFSR 108.B that would be re-opened as a system road. This section of road is currently used to access the informal shooting range above Harris Park. However, this road is not shown on the MVUM; therefore, this use is technically illegal. The proposed change would place this section of road on the MVUM and allow this use to continue in a legal manner.

Several NFSRs or portions of NFSRs would be decommissioned. In several cases, these roads were closed in the past, but their status was not changed at the time. The proposed action would correct this past mistake. In other cases, road segments with no clear need for access, or where adverse resource effects are occurring, would be decommissioned.

Table 2 Current Transportation System and Access

Access Type	Route Type (miles)					Total (miles)
	System Road	System Trail	Non-system Road	Non-system Trail	Decommissioned Road	
Yearlong, Administrative or Permitted Use	14.21	-	3.10	-	-	17.31
Yearlong, Licensed Vehicles	5.16	-	-	-	-	5.16
Seasonal, Licensed Vehicles	-	-	-	-	-	-
Yearlong, All Vehicles	61.83	-	-	-	-	61.83
Seasonal, All Vehicles	-	-	-	-	-	-
Yearlong, Non-motorized ¹	1.19	37.11	9.63	34.94	6.49	89.37
Total	82.39	37.11	12.73	34.94	6.49	173.67

Note: the analysis area also contains 50.53 miles of roads that are not under National Forest jurisdiction (state, county, or private roads, etc.). These roads are not included in this analysis.

¹ Non-motorized routes include non-motorized system trails, system roads that are not open to motorized use (stored roads), decommissioned roads, and all non-system roads and trails except those where motorized use is authorized by special use permit.

Table 3 Proposed Changes in Transportation System and Access

Access Type	Route Type (miles)					Total (miles)
	System Road	System Trail	Non-system Road	Non-system Trail	Decommissioned Road	
Yearlong, Administrative or Permitted Use	+3.12	-	+0.29	-	-	+3.41
Yearlong, Licensed Vehicles	+0.05	-	-	-	-	+0.05
Seasonal, Licensed Vehicles	+1.88	-	-	-	-	+1.88
Yearlong, All Vehicles	-36.09	+19.98	-	-	-	-16.11
Seasonal, All Vehicles	+2.94	+5.00	-	-	-	+7.94
Yearlong, Non-motorized ¹	+1.73	+36.79	-5.42	-26.95	+4.97	+11.12
Total	-26.36	+61.77	-5.13	-26.95	+4.97	+8.30 ²

Note: the analysis area also contains 50.53 miles of roads that are not under National Forest jurisdiction (state, county, or private roads, etc.). These roads are not included in this analysis.

¹ Non-motorized routes include non-motorized system trails, system roads that are not open to motorized use (stored roads), decommissioned roads, and all non-system roads and trails except those where motorized use is authorized by special use permit.

² The increase in total route miles reflects development of new non-motorized system trails.

Table 4 Maintenance Levels

Objective Maintenance Level	Miles		
	Current	Future	Change
1	3.72	13.91	+10.18
2	73.67	40.97	-32.70
3	5.39	8.76	+3.36
D	6.64	11.46	+4.82
n/a	105.96	50.53	-55.43
T	37.11	106.87	+69.76
Total	232.50	232.50	0.00

Objective Maintenance Level Definitions:

1: Intermittent service routes that are closed to motorized traffic for a period exceeding one year. There is no short-term need for access on these routes, but there is a potential long-term need. Also referred to as “stored” routes.

2: Routes maintained for use by high-clearance vehicles, but not passenger cars.

3: Routes maintained for use by passenger cars.

D: Decommissioned – these routes serve no short- or long-term need and are restored to non-road uses such as wildlife habitat.

n/a: not applicable – in the current system this includes non-system roads and trails, as well as roads in the analysis area that are not part of the analysis because they are under local or state jurisdiction. In the future system, all non-system roads and trails would be placed in one of the other maintenance level categories.

T: National Forest System Trail

4.2 Recreation Opportunities

This section describes the proposed changes to recreation opportunities. These changes are proposed in coordination with the changes to the transportation system. Since road and trail uses are themselves recreational opportunities, these proposed changes are not repeated here, although Table 5 summarizes these opportunities. The proposed changes to recreation opportunities have been divided into two categories: developed and undeveloped (dispersed) recreation. Each of these categories has been further divided by geographical area to clarify those changes that are proposed for each area.

Table 5 Publicly Accessible Routes by Type

Access Type	Current	Proposed	Change
Open to Motorized Use by Licensed Vehicles Only ¹	5.16	7.09	+1.93
Open to Motorized Use by Licensed or Unlicensed Vehicles ¹	61.83	53.66	-8.17
Non-motorized Use Only ²	37.11	67.42	+30.31

¹ Includes roads or trails under National Forest System jurisdiction that can be publicly accessed using the described access type on a seasonal or yearlong basis. Does not include routes limited to administrative or permitted access or non-system routes that cannot be legally accessed, in some cases despite current, illegal, public use.

² Includes routes under National Forest System jurisdiction limited to non-motorized use. Does not include routes limited to administrative or permitted access, stored routes, decommissioned routes, or non-system routes. Almost all of the proposed routes currently exist as non-system routes and in many cases are used by the public for non-motorized access.

4.2.1 Developed Recreation

4.2.1.1 *Guanella Pass Corridor*

- Improve the initial portion of NFSR 119 as recommended in the draft High Country Travel Analysis and create a day-use OHV trailhead with adequate room for parking, trailers, loading ramp, outhouse, and other improvement. Keep this area separate from overnight parking at dispersed sites. Keep the road beyond fairly rough to provide backcountry travel experience.
- Improve the South Park trailhead area on NFSR 119, and then re-route the lower end of the Shelf Lake trail (around ½ mile) to use the same trailhead. Eliminate the current Shelf Lake trailhead in Smelter Gulch.
- Upgrade the trail surface on the barrier free trail from Burning Bear to the viewpoint above the switchbacks.

4.2.1.2 *Hall Valley Area (Hall Valley and Handcart Campgrounds, Gibson Lake Trailhead, OHV trailhead, Beaver Creek trailhead)*

- A new OHV trailhead area would be constructed at the intersection of NFSR 123 and NFSR 123.A, with an outhouse, signs, loading ramp, and other improvements.
- The existing OHV trailhead area along NFSR 120 would be moved farther west (near the intersection of NFSR 120 and NFSR 121). The section of NFSR 120 between the old and new trailheads would be changed to licensed vehicles only.

4.2.1.3 *Harris Park Area*

- A new trailhead for the Meridian Trailhead would be developed adjacent to the Meridian Campground. The existing Meridian Trailhead and access road (NFSR 102) would be decommissioned – except that a portion of the access road would be converted to the trail from the new trailhead to the existing trail. A portion of NFSR 102 would be kept open for permitted access to Camp Rosalie only.

4.2.1.4 *Kenosha Pass Area*

- A gate would be added on NFSR 126 just off U.S. Highway 285 to control access to the area.
- The Kenosha East campground would be expanded to incorporate some of area currently being used for dispersed camping by converting portions of NFSRs 126.A and 126.C into a loop and adding campground amenities such as tables, fire rings, and outhouses. Remaining dispersed campsites and illegal roads would be obliterated.
- A secure gate would be installed at the back of the Kenosha West campground (NFSR 849).
- The Timberline campground would be reconstructed to include better roads, improved vehicle barriers, and new outhouses.

4.2.1.5 *Shawnee Corridor (Bailey to Grant)*

- The Ben Tyler trailhead would be re-located to the AG Ranch, with construction of a new connecting trail and decommissioning of the old trail and trailhead.

4.2.2 Dispersed Recreation

4.2.2.1 General

- Camping would be restricted to developed sites on approximately 3,300 acres (within approximately one mile of developed sites) as described for each area below and shown in Figure 3.
- Existing dispersed sites in the restricted areas would be closed and rehabilitated.
- Parking would be limited to designated sites.
- Dispersed camping would be limited to designated sites within ½ mile of roads.
- Existing dispersed sites and parking areas that are not designated would be closed and rehabilitated.
- Physical barriers (gates, rocks, wood or timber fencing, metal post and cable, ripping, slashing, seeding, and other methods) would be used to control access.
- Signs would be installed to provide information on allowable use, camping areas, rules and regulations, and interpretive features.

4.2.2.2 Guanella Pass Corridor

- Dispersed camping would not be allowed along NFSR 119 between Park County Road 62 (Guanella Pass Road) and up to ½ mile past the new OHV trailhead.
- The Buno Gulch area (along NFSR 118.E) would be improved as a semi-developed campground with designated pull through routes, parking areas, and campsites. Some sites would be reduced in extent. Sites closest to the stream and other with unacceptable resource damage would be closed. Corrals, tables, fire rings, outhouses, and other improvements may be constructed.

4.2.2.3 Hall Valley Area

- Dispersed camping would not be allowed along NFSR 120 or along NFSR 120.C east of the Gibson Lake trailhead.
- Dispersed camping would not be allowed along NFSR 123 between Park County Road 60 and the intersection with NFSR 123.A.
- Dispersed camping sites at the intersection of NFSR 123 and 123.A would be designated. Some sites would be reduced in extent. Sites closest to the stream and other with unacceptable resource damage would be closed.

4.2.2.4 Harris Park Area

- No dispersed camping would be allowed along Park County Road 43 from the Forest Boundary to the Deer Creek Trailhead.
- No dispersed camping would be allowed along NFSR 102, including the Meridian Trailhead.

4.2.2.5 Kenosha Pass Area

- No dispersed camping would be allowed on the west side of the pass (within ½ mile of the Kenosha Pass Campground) or on the east side of the pass between U. S Highway 285 and the private lands along NFSR 126.
- No dispersed camping would be allowed within ½ mile of Timberline Campground. The dispersed site immediately outside the Timberline Campground would be closed and rehabilitated.
- Designated dispersed camping would be implemented along NFSR 126 east of the private lands, but the area would be monitored and closed to camping if unacceptable resource damage occurs.